

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 15th November 2015 10am

Revd Val Reid

1 Sam 1: 4-20

⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb.

⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb.

⁷So it went on year after year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'

⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord.

¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly.

¹¹She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.'

¹²As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk.

¹⁴So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.'

¹⁵But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord.

¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.'

¹⁷Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.'

¹⁸And she said, 'Let your servant find favour in your sight.' Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.'

Sermon

Today is prisons Sunday.

This week we are invited to pray for and think about the needs of prisoners and their families, victims of crime, and prison staff.

Our collect earlier this morning was the Prisons Week prayer.

Reading today's lectionary passage from the very beginning of the book of Samuel, I was reminded powerfully that:

*stone walls do not a prison make,
nor iron bars a cage.*

Terry Waite was kept in solitary confinement as a hostage for many years.

Afterwards he said that what sustained him during this time was the spiritual and cultural capital he had built up over the years.

He had good friends who remembered him and prayed for him.

He had years of faith.

He had his mind and imagination stocked with the books he had read all his life.

Many prisoners do not have spiritual and cultural capital.

As David Blunkett pointed out, the majority of prisoners are in jail because they have been exploited.

They have been trapped by the drugs trade.

They have lived in poverty.

Many have been homeless, rootless, unemployed.

A high proportion of prisoners have mental health problems.

A very high proportion are dyslexic, autistic, or struggle with ADHD.

Many of these young men were in prison before they ever offended, and were sentenced.

They were prisoners of their lives.

Today's story introduces us to the many prisons in which Hannah was trapped.

She was a childless woman imprisoned in a society that valued women for their ability to provide sons.

She was Elkanah's first wife, the one that he loved.

But this doesn't stop him taking a second wife, Peninnah, when Hannah is unable to have children.

Like Rachel and Sarah before her, she suffered the torture of seeing another woman get pregnant and bear sons, while she was barren.

Her sense of self, her identity, her self-esteem – all undermined because she was unable to conform to the stereotypes that her community expected of women.

More than that, she was imprisoned by dysfunctional family relationships.

The other wife taunted and provoked her, and it was especially poignant each year when the family went to sacrifice at the sacred shrine of Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant was kept.

The tradition was for the patriarch to give a portion of food from the sacrifice to each member of his family.

Peninnah had a massive amount of food – a portion for her, and one for each of her sons and daughters.

Hannah only got one portion.

In fact, her husband was so fond of her that he used to give her a double portion to make her feel better.

I wonder whether that actually made her feel better?

Or worse.

And Hannah was stuck in the prison of depression.

She wept and would not eat.

She must have felt isolated from her family.

From her community.

She must have felt helpless to change anything.

Her husband kept trying to cheer her up.

Hannah, why do you weep?

Why do you not eat?

Why is your heart sad?

Am I not more to you than ten sons?

Those of us who have lived with depression, or with people suffering from depression, know that being cheered up only makes things worse.

There is probably no answer to the question *why?*

Why do you weep?

I just do.

Being told to pull your socks up doesn't help.

Being told to count your blessings doesn't help.

Depression is a prison too.

Perhaps more than anything, Hannah is imprisoned by her understanding of God.

Or rather her misunderstanding of God.

Everyone believes that she is unable to have children because the Lord had closed her womb.

Like Job, she must have asked herself again and again – *what have I done to deserve this?*

Why is this happening to me?

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, individual men and women, whole tribes and communities, struggle to understand who God is, what God is like.

Is God on our side?

Will God protect us from our enemies?

Will God give us what we need?

When these things don't happen – is it a divine punishment?

Can we bargain with God?

If we behave better, will we get our promised land?

To be constrained by a mindset that sees God as vindictive, or judgemental, or even perhaps –as in this case – simply forgetful: that kind of belief is a prison too.

But this story is a story of hope.

A story of grace.

A story reminds us that transformation is possible.

What makes the difference is that Hannah is willing to be honest about the things that imprison her.
To name them.
To ask God for help.

On Friday, storm 'Abigail' hit the west coast of Scotland.
This is the first named storm in the UK.
The USA has had named storms for years – in fact ex-hurricane Kate hit our country yesterday.
There is something powerful about naming our storms.
We are saying that we see them, and recognise their destructive power.
We are not pretending they are not there, or that if we tell ourselves they are not that bad, then they will go away.
We found out what a useless tactic that can be in 1987!

Hannah names her imprisonment in the shrine at Shiloh, before God.
She names it so passionately and powerfully that Eli, the priest, thinks she must be drunk.
In a 21st century culture that values positive thinking, problem solving, smart targets – we are at risk of avoiding the painful truth that there are some things we cannot solve.
Some things we cannot fix.
Naming our storms – our prisons – opens us up to new possibilities, not of our making, but of God's.

And Hannah does something else: she gets on with her life.
After Eli, the priest, has blessed her, she *went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.*
Having placed this in God's hands, she is free to be herself.

After Friday's killings in Paris, many ordinary people recognised that perhaps one of the worst consequences could be that we all feel imprisoned.

This is a war on happiness, said Benjamin Romain who was at the Stade de France with his brother and 12-year-old nephew.
People were just outside, living their lives, not thinking about anything.

They are trying to mess with our heads, said Johann Hervé, who lives just down the road from the Bataclan theatre.
In a city as multicultural as Paris, he recognised that the real prison would be to stop trusting each other, stop living daily lives side by side with Muslim neighbours and friends.
To stop being ourselves.

In prisons week, let us pray for, and think about those who are in prison.
Not just those serving a sentence in jail, but those in other prisons.
Those in the prison which society constructs for people who don't fit in.
Those imprisoned by violence.
By political powerlessness.
By fear.

And let us pray for ourselves – for the prisons which trap and constrain us.
Let us have the courage to name our prisons before God.
And then let us get on with our lives.
Let us be ourselves.
And let us wait with Advent hope for the coming of a grace which can transform everything.
Amen.